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ABSTRACT

It is not uncommon for counselors to experience professional burnout due to a combination of circumstances including, among other things, unrealistic expectations, frustration, and a heavy workload. Society in general and schools in particular tend to emphasize accountability, measurable achievements, and quantitative results. This places a premium on systematic left brain thinking, but this pressure also contributes to counselor burnout. Through the use of fantasy into the future exercises, counselors can use their right brain imaginative and creative talents to enhance their self-esteem and to identify their values and goals. By synthesizing these right brain inputs with left brain logic and systematic planning, counselors can combat burnout and contribute to their own well-being and the successful treatment of their clients. (Excerpts from the script of a Future Projection Fantasy is provided as an example of a simple exercise that can be used as a model.) (Author/NB)

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COMBATING COUNSELOR BURNOUT: THE USE OF RIGHT AND LEFT BRAIN APPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Counselor burnout can be counteracted by the use of right brain fantasy into the future exercises, followed by left brain planning, goal setting and directed action.

ABSTRACT

It is not uncommon for counselors to experience professional burnout due to a combination of circumstances including, among other things, unrealistic expectations, frustration, and a heavy workload. Society in general and schools in particular tend to emphasize accountability, measurable achievements and quantitative results. This places a premium on systematic left brain thinking, but this pressure also contributes to counselor burnout. However, through the use of fantasy into the future exercises counselors can utilize their right brain imaginative and creative talents to enhance their self-esteem and to identify their values and goals. By synthesizing these right brain inputs with left brain logic and systematic planning, counselors can combat burnout and contribute to their own well being and the successful treatment of their clients.

COMBATING COUNSELOR BURNOUT:
THE USE OF RIGHT AND LEFT BRAIN APPLICATIONS

Those of us in the helping professions deal with the problem of burnout in others so often that by the time we ourselves are exhibiting some of the symptoms described in professional journals we finally bow our heads in tired, tacit agreement and add, "Me too." Research on burnout conducted by Maher (1983) yields a profile of a person who exhibits at least two of the following symptoms: exhaustion and fatigue; psychosomatic illness; insomnia, or increased need for sleep; negative attitudes toward work in general and, perhaps most sadly, negative attitudes toward clients in particular; absences and/or poor work performance; increased use of chemical agents; loss of appetite or overeating; negative self-concept; aggressive feelings of irritability, restlessness, tensions, anger, and paranoia; passive feelings of cynicism, pessimism, hopelessness, apathy, depression, boredom, and/or meaninglessness. These are some of the feelings, thoughts and behaviors counselors experience when they burnout. It is interesting to note that of all the authors cited by Maher, only one, Paine (1981) mentioned guilt as a burnout symptom. Since intangible rewards are presumed to be the most meaningful for helping professionals,

guilt might be expected to appear as often as most of the other symptoms.

The causes most often cited as having high negative impact on mental health professionals include an excessively large or difficult client load; long working hours over extended periods without time off; ambiguous role demands (which often include too many secondary duties); lack of perceived control over outcomes; monotony; isolation or poor work relationships; lack of preparation for dealing with job stress; unrealistic expectations and guilt (Maher, 1983).

From this identification of the "whats" of burnout, we can proceed to the "whys" of the problem. Since its occurrence is so particularly prevalent among mental health workers for whom reinforcements such as work relationships and recognition from the public and by superiors become so important as deterrents of low self-esteen, there is also a need to develop some "hows."

Counselors must learn to depend upon their own creative efforts to find, as Marks (1977) suggests, fruitful ways of regenerating the expandable energy that is theirs to tap. If, as he says, that energy, while not actually boundaried is not infinite, counselors need to apply their unique resources for recharging their exhausted batteries right here in the present so that tomorrow is not lost. It is the contention of this article

that the utilization of right and left brain thinking presents an excellent method by which counselors can be helped to combat burnout.

Right versus Left Brain Operations

As most counselors are aware, each hemisphere of the brain specializes in certain mental functions (Bry, 1978; Donald & Holloway, 1984; Gazzaniga, 1970; Ornstein, 1973). The right side controls the integration of many inputs at the same time, seeking patterns and gestalts. It processes information difusely and takes a nonlineal and simultaneous, in-parallel mode of operation. The right hemisphere perceives and constructs patterns and, therefore, is more efficient at visuospatial tasks. This hemisphere is responsible for awareness of our bodies; for sports and dancing; our orientation in space; recognition of faces; art and musical abilities. It is the seat of all creative endeavors (Ornstein, 1973; Williams, 1983).

The left hemisphere, on the other hand, processes information sequentially, in a linear manner. It deals with time rather than space, and is responsible for verbal expression, or language ability. Other responsibilities of the left hemisphere include mathematical functioning, recognition of words and numbers; specialization in logic, and analytical reasoning or thinking (Ornstein, 1973; Williams, 1983).

"Without the full use of our right brains, we are at best using only half of our potential" (Bry, 1978, p.12). As children we have been encouraged to stop daydreaming, to stop thinking intuitively and inventively, and to start reasoning logically, analytically and sequentially; to start reading and computing mathematically. It seems easier to deal with left brain functions because they are so concrete, so measureable, and, above all, so verifiable. It has actually become embarrassing in contemporary society for people to say they have been dreaming, because this function has become so ridiculed that there is a powerful prejudice in operation against it (Samples, 1975).

Egged on by public demands for accountability, teachers, administrators, psychologists, counselors and the whole of the school community tend to focus on left hemisphere operations. Although the right side of the brain continues to function, we become insensitive to the spontaneous side of our nature and wind up limping and lopsided (Samples, 1975). Counselors are caught up not only in embracing "intellectual" functioning, but also in longer hours, increased duties and heavier client loads, working to beat the clock in processing forms and people, and when they are without dream or fantasy outlets, they become burned out. The time has

come for counselors to rediscover the use of their imaginations for constructive purpose rather than merely for an occasional escape route, and to learn to experience the full range of their minds.

Abraham Maslow (1970) talked of self-actualization and about reaching the full potential of human beings. Maslow suggested creativity as the most important fundamental in his theory which separated man from animals. Among the characteristics of self-actualized persons, he included a freshness of approach to daily experiences and problems and a feeling of mission and joy about one's work which transcends the usual dichotomy of work and play. Surely, Maslow's actualizers are "whole brain" individuals who can creatively and effectively deal with burnout.

The verbal, analytical process usually identified with thinking is only one way of processing information. A second, equally powerful way also exists. There is an opportunity to broaden counseling strategies so as to develop techniques which present and manipulate information in new ways (Williams, 1983). In classroom research, when functions of the right cerebral hemisphere were used and accepted, students' self-esteem increased. Left hemisphere performances simultaneously also increased, and students elected to explore more content areas

in greater depth (Samples, 1975). It may be reasonable to assume that right brain exercises would have similar effects on counselor performance and help to alleviate the discomfort of burnout through heightened discovery of areas of competency and fulfillment. The right hemisphere talents of imagination, perspective, and intuition may prove essential to our personal and cultural survival (Ornstein, 1973).

A holistic mode of information processing is a very good method for bridging gaps. It enables us to perceive patterns even when logical, sequential modes cannot skip over spaces. If right hemisphere processing is ignored, we find ourselves trying to function without complete information (Galin, 1976).

The Use of Fantasy

Fantasizing is very much a holistic right brain technique. It is particularly effective for people who need to gain an awareness of the "how" and "what" of their present behavior (Okun, 1982). People experiencing monotony, who are interacting rigidly, in a ritualized manner with their environment, and who are refusing to take responsibility for themselves, can choose to make use of fantasy techniques to take charge and direct their own lives.

Fantasizing is something that everybody does, but relatively few people are able to control it to discover how to make it work for them. Current research in creativity and problem solving indicate this is a serious loss, since creative, effective adults make frequent use of fantasy (Williams, 1983). Fantasy is a tool for getting you to places you can't reach any other way, for increasing motivation to learn, and it is a thinking skill that counselors can use for themselves as well as for clients. Human beings unconsciously use the functions of the most appropriate hemisphere when confronted with problems. Hemispheric differentiation can be verified by observation. If a question involves logical, linear processing, the eyes go right. If a problem requires spatial and image processing, the eyes shift left. Therefore, the nature of the problem can determine which hemisphere is called into action to perform in mental modes consistent with its own specialized skills (Ornstein, 1973).

Albert Einstein's fantasy of himself riding a ray of light played an important role in the discovery of the theory of relativity (Williams, 1983). Counselors can also use the form of fantasy to create entities and processes that have never existed. The movies-of-our-minds can bypass the limitations of the cognitive, rational, analytical, linear thinking mind and tap the limitless source from which

emotions, intuitions, creativity and imagination flow (Bry, 1978). The result can be the kind of invention that creates a new level of awareness for humanity. In fantasy, we receive, without verbal awareness, images from the right hemisphere. This cannot be forced to happen, and some people have lost the ability to imagine and fantasize sufficiently to participate in the exercises, but it is possible to create the conditions which allow images from the right hemisphere to reach consciousness easily.

To utilize fantasy, the mind must be in a state of relaxed attention, alert and receptive to inner imagery. (Williams, 1983). This state can be used to make contact with a resisted event, feeling, person, situation, personal characteristics, values, desired outcomes or the unknown. We can use it to look at the future from a vantage point from which we can gain the ability to improve the quality of our lives.

This type of holistic, intuitive thinking may actually be made to order for those in the mental health professions, such as teaching, clergy, counseling, psychology, and psychiatry, who prefer to focus their attention on possibilities, and tend to be enthusiastic and insightful. They are more naturally prepared to use right cerebral hemisphere thinking because they tend to be intuitive types, as reported on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers, 1976), who prefer to find out through meanings and relationships that are beyond

the reach of the senses. Intuition can be especially useful in determining an appropriate response to a particular situation. Counselors also tend to be feeling types who take into account matters that are important to them and to other people, without requiring that they be logical, and then make decisions on the basis of personal values. It may be that counselors suffering from burnout symptoms have abanoned their preferential modes of behavior because of work pressures and life stresses. They are attempting to deal with the environment in a manner that is inconsistent and uncomfortable.

Fantasy exercises are consistent with intuitive and feeling types of persons who prefer to consider things that have not happened yet, including new possibilities to enrich and brighten their lives. The first step in utilizing right brain ability is to select a place that is quiet. Extraneous sounds can destroy concentration and even turn up as an unplanned part of the fantasy. Twenty to thirty minutes should be set aside at a time that will not be inconvenient or rushed. Next, the body should be in a comfortable, relaxed position. The fantasy can be delivered by a peer counselor, or it can be put on a tape recorder, being sure to pace the narration so that it is smooth, clear and unhurried, and that it includes a relaxation exercise. The exercise of writing the script itself is a powerful stimulant for creativity as the possibilities are limitless and there

are opportunities to enable something new and exciting to emerge. The following Future Projection Fantasy is an example of a simple exercise that can be used as a model:

> Get comfortable in your chair . . . Close your eyes . . . Relax your body, and become aware of your body sensations. . . Focus your attention on your breathing . . . Feel the air as it enters your nostrils as you inhale . . . Feel the air as you exhale through your nose or mouth. . . Breathe deeply . . . and slowly. . . and evenly . . .
>
> To help you relax even more, a white light is entering your body through the soles of your feet . . . It is a lovely, pure, peaceful white light. . . and the feeling you experience as it enters your body is that of beautiful serenity . . . Feel the light moving up through your feet relaxing them more and more. . . moving up and relaxing your ankles. . . your calves. . . soothing your thighs . . . and hips. . . your waist, your spine. . . and your chest are relaxing. . . It moves through your shoulders. . . and down your arms. . .relaxing your biceps. . . your forearms. . . wrists. . . hands and fingers . . . Feel the light peacefully soothing your neck . . . relaxing your jaws . . . face. . . and all the little muscles of your scalp . . . Your body is comfortable . . . relaxed. . . and your breathing is slow and even . . . Continue

to enjoy the way your body feels as you begin your fantasy journey. . .

The time is five years from now. . . It is early morning and you are lying in bed awakening to the sounds of the morning. . . Get up out of bed, and prepare for your day. . . See yourself as you wash . . . brush your teeth . . . dress. . . and get ready . . . When you look into the mirror to check your appearance, what makes you feel good about the way you look?. . .

Now go to breakfast. . . Notice the food. . . and your surroundings. . . It is time to go to work . . . See yourself moving toward your place of employment. . . You are at the place where you work. . . Notice the outside of the building . . . Walk in . . . look around you. . . Who is there besides yourself? What are they doing? . . . How do you feel about these people and your interactions with them? . . . What kinds of furnishings do you see? . . . What kinds of equipment?. . . Listen for sounds . . . become aware of smells . . . and discover textures . . . What are you doing? . . . What are the things you like best about your position? . . . What kind of training have you had for this job? . . . What changes would you have to make for this job to be perfect for you?. . . Take a moment to experience

more about your place of employment . . . the work you do here, and your feelings about it . . .

Now it is late afternoon and time to leave. . . You return home. . . As you walk through your door, notice your surroundings. . . Are you alone at home . . . or are others with you?. . . You have free time before dinner. What do you do?. . . What do you like about your leisure activity?. . . You eat dinner. . . What do you do now?. . . What was the most important thing about your day to you?. . .

Your day has ended . . . and you are ready to come back to this room feeling refreshed and renewed. . . Take a deep breath . . . and when you are ready, stretch . . . open your eyes. . . and sit up.

From Fantasy to Fact

At this point, the fantasy may have ended, but burnout rehabilitation has only begun. It is now essential to take time to reflect on the experience as a whole. Functions of the left cerebral hemisphere can be called into play, increasing lateral specialization and integration. The left hemisphere which works like a digital computer can string the right brain fantasy beads of images, feelings and behaviors into relevance, logic and meaning. In all probability, a brighter future will not emerge simply by fan-

tasizing about it (Parnes, 1984). Although new patterns for life enrichment may have appeared, the bottom line, as in all creative undertaking, is making something happen. The right brain fantasy processes are the vehicles for triggering new ideas, but they require the analytical plans and strategies generated by the left hemisphere to make them realities. Plans of action for goal implementation can be developed in a detailed, sequential manner, and an appropriate time frame can be delineated.

Using imagery can help counselors identify the changes that need to be made in their lives. These may be additions or deletions, and they may involve quality as well as quantity. Some of these changes may occur almost spontaneously and with relative ease. Others will require a great deal of desire, motivation and a willingness to take risks. The possibility of making large or significant changes in a lifestyle pattern may pose a threat to a person's needs for safety and security, but it is a recognizable responsibility for the individual. The important thing is for counselors to see themselves in positions where they feel work satisfaction, reward, personal growth and renewal through the use of imagery. The fantasy exercise is a pleasant way to spend a half-hour now and then, but it will take a plan, commitment, and work to make it a successful treatment for burnout.

Counselors need to appreciate their own abilities and contributions in order to fulfill their personal needs and to combat burnout problems. When they engage in meaningful self-serving activities, they will be able to perform their work better and to provide benefits to others as well. Developing plans and goals makes the present more invigorating. Working toward those goals through the interaction of both halves of the brain can make the future self a controlling, secure reality.

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